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Reluctantly Inspired: George MacDonald and J.R.R. Tolkien

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Notes and Queries

Connections

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That George MacDonald was one of several early influences on J.R.R. Tolkien—along with William Morris, Andrew Lang, H. Rider Haggard,[1] and others—has long been known by scholars. Tolkien himself hinted at this as early as 1939, in the first version of his landmark essay, "On Fairy-Stories," delivered as an Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland well before its publication in 1947. The connection became still clearer with the publication of Humphrey Carpenter's seminal biography of Tolkien (1977) and his edition of Tolkien's letters (1981). These also make clear the fact that, much later in his life, Tolkien held a rather different and no longer particularly favorable opinion of MacDonald and his works. But despite the indications of a causal line of inspiration between MacDonald and Tolkien, relatively little subsequent work on the subject has been done.[2] In the present article, I hope to address this deficit in the scholarship, albeit briefly, by examining the influence of MacDonald's fantasy writings for children on several key works by Tolkien. Moreover, I believe that one can see evidence of the two distinct attitudes toward MacDonald in Tolkien's fiction: one that is very much indebted to and influenced by MacDonald, and another, later one in which Tolkien has made a complete *volte face* from his earlier view. Exactly when and why this occurred and what it may signify is an interesting question, and one I hope to touch on at the conclusion of this paper.

J.R.R. Tolkien's appreciation of George MacDonald began at a very young age—before he was ten years old, and perhaps even earlier that that. Humphrey Carpenter documents the young Tolkien's fondness for MacDonald's children's fantasy, writing that

> he was amused by *Alice in Wonderland*, though he had no desire to have adventures like Alice. He did not enjoy *Treasure Island*, nor the stories of Hans Andersen, nor the *Pied Piper*. But he liked Red Indian stories and longed to shoot with a bow and arrow. He was even more

> pleased by the 'Curdie' books of George Macdonald [sic], which were
> set in a remote kingdom where misshapen and malevolent goblins
> lurked beneath the mountains. (Carpenter 22)

Much later, the adult Tolkien, a man now with a family of his own, would continue to read these stories to his own children. Again, as Carpenter explains:

> Besides being entertained by their father's own stories, the
> Tolkien children were always provided with full nursery
> bookshelves. Much of their reading-matter consisted of Tolkien's
> own childhood favorites, such as George Macdonald's [sic]
> 'Curdie' stories and Andrew Lang's fairy-tale collections. . .
> (164-5)

And this last point raises an interesting personal parallel between MacDonald and Tolkien. Just as Tolkien's early fiction was "tested out" on the young audience of his own children, so too, MacDonald's children comprised a similar audience for Lewis Carroll. Tolkien himself, in his abandoned draft introduction to "The Golden Key" (to which I'll return again shortly), points out that "it was George MacDonald's own children who first heard *Alice in Wonderland* read from manuscript, and Lewis Carroll published it because it had delighted them" (Tolkien, *Smith* 73). Moreover, the dust-jacket blurb for *The Hobbit* also asserts that "the birth of *The Hobbit* recalls very strongly that of *Alice in Wonderland*" (Tolkien, *Letters* 21). MacDonald's children, then, performed a very similar role to Tolkien's own children (and the son of his publisher, Stanley Unwin)[3] a century later.

Tolkien's childhood affinity for MacDonald clearly found its way into his own early writing, especially those works now customarily identified as "children's" books: *Roverandom*, *Mr. Bliss*, *The Father Christmas Letters*, and *The Hobbit*. One or two examples from each should suffice to establish the clear chain of inspiration. In *Roverandom*, for instance, the fanciful, incongruous flying and capering of Roverandom and the Moon-dog seem to echo the image of the air-fish in "The Golden Key." Likewise, the rather strange and fantastical hybrid nature of the air-fish may find resonance in the Girabbit of *Mr. Bliss*.

Both *Mr. Bliss* and "The Golden Key," like the earlier story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" collected by the Brothers Grimm, also contain a trio of bears as minor characters. And where MacDonald is clearly invoking the earlier folkloric tradition, Tolkien may have been invoking MacDonald. In *"*The Golden Key," Tangle encounters and then runs from three bears, brought to life from the folkloric tale by fairies:

> So the next moment she heard the voices of the three bears upon the
> stair, big voice, middle voice, and little voice, and she heard their soft,
> heavy tread, as if they had stockings over their boots, coming nearer
> and nearer to the door of her room, till she could bear it no longer. She
> did just as Silverhair[4] did, and as the fairies wanted her to do; she
> darted to the window, pulled it open, got upon the ivy, and so scrambled
> to the ground. She then fled to the forest as fast as she could run. (26)

This episode is reminiscent of Mr. Bliss's fanciful encounter with the three
bears —Archie, Teddy, and Bruno—in the wood outside of town.

Both *The Father Christmas Letters* and *The Hobbit*, particularly the
latter, demonstrate a clear borrowing of MacDonald's conception of the
subterraneous race of the goblins, as depicted in *The Princess and Curdie* and
The Princess and the Goblin. Tolkien acknowledges the similarity in his
letters more than once, alluding to "the goblins of George MacDonald, which
they [the goblins of Middle-earth] do to some extent resemble" (Tolkien,
Letters 185). In fact, it is only in one small detail that Tolkien's goblins differ
from MacDonald's, as Tolkien explains: "*Goblin* is used as a translation in
The Hobbit, … especially as it appears in George MacDonald, except for the
soft feet which I never believed in" (Tolkien, *Letters* 178).

Another possible echo of MacDonald's Curdie novels in *The Hobbit*
appears in Tolkien's depiction of the trolls. These are, in some respects,
simply very large, and even more uncouth, versions of the diminutive
goblins. In Chapter 8 of *The Princess and the Goblin*, for example, we find
this descriptive passage: "It sounded like a voice inside the rock. After a
while he [Curdie] heard it again. *It was a goblin voice—there could be no
doubt about that*—and this time he could make out the words" (MacDonald
Goblin, emphasis mine). This is very similar, to my ear, to Tolkien's
introduction of the trolls:

> Three very large persons sitting round a very large fire of beech-logs.
> They were toasting mutton on long spits of wood, and licking the gravy
> off their fingers … *But they were trolls. Obviously trolls. Even Bilbo,
> in spite of his sheltered life, could see that*: from the great heavy faces
> of them, and their size, and the shape of their legs, not to mention their
> language, which was not drawing-room fashion at all, at all.
> (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 44, emphasis mine)

Following the goblin introduction in MacDonald, Curdie overhears a
conversation between several unidentified goblin voices, in a scene that
immediately reminds one of the argument among the trolls in *The Hobbit*. In
that case, however, the unidentified voice is Gandalf's, posing first as one

troll and then another, as he keeps them busy bickering until the sunrise—which, of course, is fatal to the trolls. The two scenes, though each deals with a different variety of wicked creature, parallel one another rather closely.

These are just a few examples of the resemblance, and, therefore, the likely chain of influence, between MacDonald's and Tolkien's children's fantasy.[5] But over the course of his life, Tolkien began to think rather differently of MacDonald and his writings. Even by the time of his essay "On Fairy-Stories"—in its print version by 1947 and revised subsequently for inclusion in *Tree and Leaf* (1964)—Tolkien's opinion of MacDonald was beginning to tarnish. In that essay, he wrote that

> the fairy-story. . .may (but not so easily) be made a vehicle of Mystery. This at least is what George MacDonald attempted, achieving stories of power and beauty when he succeeded, as in *The Golden Key* (which he called a fairy-tale); and even when he partly failed, as in *Lilith* (which he called a romance). (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 26)

Around the same time he was corresponding with Houghton Mifflin on the American edition of *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien was approached by Pantheon Books of New York and asked to write the preface to a new edition of "The Golden Key." He agreed to undertake the assignment but made a point of warning Pantheon's Michael di Capua: "I am not as warm an admirer of George MacDonald as C. S. Lewis was; but I do think well of this story of his." But despite this rather mixed assessment, he said, "I will do my best, if there is time" (Tolkien, *Letters* 351). Yet once he became immersed in the project, Tolkien found that the MacDonald he was re-reading as a man in his early seventies was not the same MacDonald he had remembered from his childhood. In a note to Clyde Kilby on the genesis of *Smith of Wootton Major*, which was struck from the kindling of his planned preface to "The Golden Key," Tolkien wrote:

> I found that a highly selective memory had retained only a few impressions of things that moved me, and re-reading G. M. critically filled me with distaste. I had of course, never thought of *The G. K.* as a story for children (though apparently G. McD did). The task thus proved distasteful to me; but I was relieved of it by collapse of the project (and for all I know perhaps of "Pantheon Books"). (Tolkien, *Smith* 69)

A little later in the note, he went on to say, even more bluntly:

> There I stopped … If I had gone on I should only have written a severely critical or 'anti' essay on G. M. – unnecessary, and a pity since G.M. has performed great services for other minds – such as Jack's

[C.S. Lewis]. But he was evidently born loving (moral) allegory, and I was born with an instinctive distaste for it. "Phantastes" wakened him, and afflicted me with profound dislike. It is better anyway to preach by example than by criticism of others. But Smith remains as it were "an anti-G.M. tract." (Tolkien, *Smith* 69-70)

At some point between 1937 and 1964, therefore, Tolkien's appraisal of MacDonald changed dramatically from that of a charming and fanciful writer of children's fantasy to an overly didactic and preachy allegorist. With a little deduction from Tolkien's letters, together with the hint, discussed previously, in "On Fairy-Stories," I think it's possible to say a little bit more about this transformation in attitude. And one may also examine the draft preface to "The Golden Key," which, though Tolkien never completed it—instead, *Smith of Wootton Major* took over his imagination and he abandoned the preface—offers several telling comments on MacDonald.

In the draft preface, ostensibly addressed to young readers, he writes: "I must warn you that he is a preacher, not only on the platform or in the pulpit; in all his many books he preaches, and it is his preaching that is valued most by the grown-up people who admire him most" (Tolkien, *Smith* 71-2). This editorial, while somewhat tongue-in-cheek, seems to me to bespeak a rather subtle criticism of MacDonald's overt sermonizing in his stories. Tolkien, in fact, may have held a similar view about C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books (Carpenter 201). In a now-famous letter to Milton Waldman, probably written in 1951, Tolkien wrote:

For one thing its [the Arthurian tradition's] "faerie" is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive. *For another and more important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion. For reasons which I will not elaborate, that seems to me fatal.* Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary "real" world. (Tolkien, *Letters* 144, emphasis mine)

Clearly, explicit and obvious theological didacticism was one of the qualities the mature Tolkien most disliked—along with allegory.

I've already cited an objection Tolkien made to MacDonald's affinity for allegory. Tolkien's own distaste for it is widely known and attested in many places—from letters written as early as the middle 1940's onward. In the same letter to Milton Waldman, he offered this distinction: "I dislike Allegory—the conscious and intentional allegory—yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language" (Tolkien, *Letters* 145). Later, in the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, he made the

point even more plainly: "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* xxiv).

Given these increasingly pejorative opinions on allegory, evidently beginning some time in the middle 1940's, together with rather tepid allusion to MacDonald in "On Fairy-Stories" at about the same time, it is reasonable to deduce that it was during these years that Tolkien's opinion shifted. These were the years of his heaviest work on *The Lord of the Rings*, a work "3 times as long [as *The Hobbit*], not for children (though that does not mean wholly unsuitable), and rather grim in places" (Tolkien, *Letters* 134). And, of course, by the time he re-read MacDonald and began to draft his preface for "The Golden Key," his opinion had reversed completely. MacDonald was now far too preachy, his Faërie far too trivial, his fairies and elves far too light and whimsical—more like Shakespeare's than Spenser's (Tolkien, *Letter*s 143). By this time, *The Lord of the Rings* was behind him (though he would be working shortly on a second edition),[6] and he was immersed in the legends and languages of the Elder Days (much of which would posthumously become *The Silmarillion*). It appears Tolkien had, himself, become rather grim, nostalgic, and pensive. Indeed, some scholars have argued that *Smith of Wootton Major* represents the final farewell of its author to the material world, to his excursion into Faërie, to his own art—or perhaps all of these (Flieger 231-8).

In a couple of passages from the draft preface to "The Golden Key," Tolkien himself may explain the difference between the kind of writer he had become and the kind of writer he perceived MacDonald to have been. He writes:

> You will have noticed that although George MacDonald wrote this tale nearly 100 years ago, he himself spoke already of "the little creatures commonly called fairies," but added 'though there are many different kinds of fairies in Fairyland.' "He might have said "older, more powerful and important kinds" but he leaves that for the readers to find out, if they do not already know it. (Tolkien, *Smith* 74)

Clearly, Tolkien felt he had uncovered a key difference between the whimsy of most "fairy-stories" and a profound and powerful mystery deeply underlying that mistaken impression of whimsy—again, this is same difference between Shakespeare's elves and Spenser's. And it seems he may have come to resent MacDonald (as he did Shakespeare) for purveying that misprision.

A little later in the preface, just before the point where Tolkien broke off to begin his own fairy tale, he goes on to issue a veiled condemnation. In it, I believe we have a perfect summary of Tolkien's perspective on the matter—in his very own words:

> A fairy tale is a tale about that world [of Fairy], a glimpse of it; if you read it, you enter Fairy with the author as your guide. He may be a bad guide or a good one: bad if he does not take the adventure seriously, and is just "spinning a yarn" which he thinks is good enough "for children"; good, if he knows something about Fairy, and has caught glimpses of it which he is trying to put into words. But Fairy is very powerful. Even the bad guide cannot escape it. He probably makes up his tale out of bits of older tales, or things he half remembers, and they may be too strong for him to spoil or disenchant. Some one may meet them for the first time in his silly tale, and catch a glimpse of Fairy and go on to better things. (Tolkien *Smith* 74)

Tolkien would no doubt count MacDonald's stories among those "silly tale[s]" and identify his own works as those "better things" inspired by that first encounter. To put it another way, Tolkien felt he had outgrown MacDonald—even if his friend, C.S. Lewis, had not. And yet even if he had, that initial fondness from childhood led, albeit circuitously, to his final published work, *Smith of Wootton Major*—published exactly one hundred years after "The Golden Key"—providing an appropriate bookend to Tolkien's lifetime of reluctant inspiration by George MacDonald.

Endnotes

1. Speaking of H. Rider Haggard, I cannot help but suspect that the adventurous character of Rider in *Smith of Wootton Major* is an homage to him.
2. Of the rather small body of scholarship on the links between Tolkien and MacDonald, some of the more notable contributions are Frank Bergmann's "The Roots of Tolkien's Tree: The Influence of George MacDonald and German Romanticism upon Tolkien's Essay 'On Fairy-Stories'" (1977), Paul Kocher's "J.R.R. Tolkien and George MacDonald" (1981), and much more recently, Verlyn Flieger's *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (1997) and her extended edition of *Smith of Wootton Major* (2005).
3. Stanley Unwin paid Rayner, his ten-year-old son, a shilling to read *The Hobbit* and to produce a written report assessing its merits as a worthwhile story for children. See Carpenter 180-1.
4. Silverhair is an alternate depiction of the character of Goldilocks in the traditional folktale.
5. Tolkien was inclined to take umbrage at references to *The Hobbit* as a work for

children; however, the novel is still generally perceived in this way. Tolkien himself grudgingly acknowledged it, with regret, later in his life (see, for example, Tolkien *Letters* 298, 310).

6. The second edition of was precipitated by the legal battle with Ace Books over its unauthorized paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings*; see Carpenter 227-9 and Tolkien Letters #269, #270, #271.

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